

The Hand of Our God Is Good – Nehemiah 13

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What a journey we have been on in 2024, as we have worked through Ezra and Nehemiah together. We have seen God move powerfully through non-believing kings of Persia and Babylon to fulfill prophecy about how and when God would restore His people from exile, restore the temple in Jerusalem, and restore the city walls and city of Jerusalem, and continue to restore His people – even as they wait in hope for the Messiah who would one day walk these very streets of Jerusalem .

In recent weeks, we saw the Jewish people respond again to the Word of God, as the law of God through Moses was read over them, we saw genuine conviction of sin, repentance, worship, prayerfulness and remembrance of God’s faithfulness, we saw covenant renewal with God, we saw the people of God return and once again dwell in Jerusalem, the city walls dedicated, the assignment and support of priests and Levites to serve God’s people in worship and care — the joy of Jerusalem was heard far away...

⁴³And they offered great sacrifices that day and rejoiced, for God had made them rejoice with great joy; the women and children also rejoiced. And the joy of Jerusalem was heard far away.

(Ne 12:43)

Nehemiah’s Final Reforms

13 On that day they read from the Book of Moses in the hearing of the people. And in it was found written that no Ammonite or Moabite should ever enter the assembly of God, ² for they did not meet the people of Israel with bread and water, but hired Balaam against them to curse them—yet our God turned the curse into a blessing. ³ As soon as the people heard the law, they separated from Israel all those of foreign descent. ⁴ Now before this (lit. “in the face of it all”^[2]) Eliashib the priest, who was appointed over the chambers of the house of our God, and who was related to Tobiah, ⁵ prepared for Tobiah a large chamber where they had previously put the grain offering, the frankincense, the vessels, and the tithes of grain, wine, and oil, which were given by commandment to the Levites, singers, and gatekeepers, and the contributions for the priests. ⁶ While this was taking place, I was not in Jerusalem, for in the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes king of Babylon I went to the king.

During Nehemiah’s twelve years away back in Babylon serving again as cupbearer to king Artaxerxes things once again went astray, and Nehemiah will confront four specific situations again. Derek Thomas would summarize it this way – Nehemiah would have to confront compromise, carelessness, commercialism, and conjugality. ¹

And after some time I asked leave of the king ⁷ and came to Jerusalem, and I then discovered the evil that Eliashib had done for Tobiah, preparing for him a chamber in the courts of the house of God. ⁸ And I was very angry, and I threw all the household furniture of Tobiah out of the chamber. ⁹ Then I gave orders, and they cleansed the chambers, and I brought back there the vessels of the house of God, with the grain offering and the frankincense.

¹ Thomas Derek, *Ezra & Nehemiah*, 401

Simply put, while Nehemiah was back in Babylon, Eliashab the priest used the temple storeroom where the tithes, offerings, and provisions for worship were to be stored and managed – this priest made it a personal storage room for Tobiah.... Anyone remember Tobiah?

Tobiah, though Jewish, was one of the guys earlier in chapters 2 and 4 who tried to prevent the reconstruction of the walls in Jerusalem. Tobiah which in Hebrew means “Yahweh is good” but as JI Packer describes him, “He was a worldly-wise formalist and pragmatist, hard hearted and hard headed who was not so foolish to let his faith affect his personal or professional life. To him also the glory of God as a motive meant nothing. He was a cynic, of a kind quite familiar in the modern world.”

And this rightfully angered Nehemiah — and he cleared it out – and restored this temple room to its intended purpose. The priest had compromised and Tobiah had long been compromised. Next we see that Nehemiah has to confront carelessness among God’s people — joyful obedient generosity – was no longer the case.

¹⁰ I also found out that the portions of the Levites had not been given to them, so that the Levites and the singers, who did the work, had fled each to his field. ¹¹ So I confronted the officials and said, “Why is the house of God forsaken?” And I gathered them together and set them in their stations.

Let’s remember that years ago the Jewish people renewed their commitment to obedience, including obedience with their financial resources: ³⁸ And the priest, the son of Aaron, shall be with the Levites when the Levites receive the tithes. And the Levites shall bring up the tithe of the tithes to the house of our God, to the chambers of the storehouse. ³⁹ For the people of Israel and the sons of Levi shall bring the contribution of grain, wine, and oil to the chambers, where the vessels of the sanctuary are, as well as the priests who minister, and the gatekeepers and the singers. We will not neglect the house of our God.”
(Ne 10:38–39)

¹² Then all Judah brought the tithe of the grain, wine, and oil into the storehouses. ¹³ And I appointed as treasurers over the storehouses Shelemiah the priest, Zadok the scribe, and Pedaiah of the Levites, and as their assistant Hanan the son of Zaccur, son of Mattaniah, for they were considered reliable, and their duty was to distribute to their brothers. ¹⁴ Remember me, O my God, concerning this, and do not wipe out my good deeds that I have done for the house of my God and for his service.

Nehemiah – confronts carelessness and greed – the people once again respond in obedience with their tithe – and then Nehemiah appoints trustworthy reliable men to oversee and distribute God’s resources. Nehemiah prays — remember me O my God — and we see that Nehemiah next has to confront a commercialized Sabbath

¹⁵ In those days I saw in Judah people treading winepresses on the Sabbath, and bringing in heaps of grain and loading them on donkeys, and also wine, grapes, figs, and all kinds of loads, which they brought into Jerusalem on the Sabbath day. And I warned them on the day when they sold food. ¹⁶ Tyrians also, who lived in the city, brought in fish and all kinds of goods and sold them on the Sabbath to the people of Judah, in Jerusalem itself!

¹⁷ Then I confronted the nobles of Judah and said to them, “What is this evil thing that you are doing, profaning the Sabbath day? ¹⁸ Did not your fathers act in this way, and did not our God bring all this disaster on us and on this city? Now you are bringing more wrath on Israel by profaning the Sabbath.”

¹⁹ As soon as it began to grow dark at the gates of Jerusalem before the Sabbath, I commanded that the doors should be shut and gave orders that they should not be opened until after the Sabbath. And I stationed some of my servants at the gates, that no load might be brought in on the Sabbath day. ²⁰ Then the merchants and sellers of all kinds of wares lodged outside Jerusalem once or twice. ²¹ But I warned them and said to them, “Why do you lodge outside the wall? If you do so again, I will lay hands on you.” From that time on they did not come on the Sabbath. ²² Then I commanded the Levites that they should purify themselves and come and guard the gates, to keep the Sabbath day holy. Remember this also in my favor, O my God, and spare me according to the greatness of your steadfast love.

Nehemiah's confrontation of Sabbath neglect – was to extend the purpose and holy space beyond the temple to include the entire city of Jerusalem – and he did this by closing the gates so that no goods or merchandise could be brought in – and he goes one step further by threatening the merchants who wanted to hover just outside the gates and wall. Nehemiah again – leading the people to purify themselves and keep the Sabbath day holy. Remember this also in my favor, O my God, and spare me according to the greatness of your steadfast love. His prayer – remember and spare me – according to the greatness of your steadfast love (hesed). Next Nehemiah has to confront conjugality – the complications of intermarriage of God's people among neighboring peoples that led to their compromise and disobedience with God.

You may remember that in Ezra 10 more than 100 marriages were examined and ended in complicated divorces that took months to figure out... and once again, in Nehemiah's 12 year absence, the marriage policy had failed and mixed marriages existed, with children who were living in two worlds because of their parents.

²³ In those days also I saw the Jews who had married women of Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab. ²⁴ And half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod, and they could not speak the language of Judah, but only the language of each people. ²⁵ And I confronted them and cursed them and beat some of them and pulled out their hair. And I made them take an oath in the name of God, saying, “You shall not give your daughters to their sons, or take their daughters for your sons or for yourselves. ²⁶ Did not Solomon king of Israel sin on account of such women? Among the many nations there was no king like him, and he was beloved by his God, and God made him king over all Israel. Nevertheless, foreign women made even him to sin. ²⁷ Shall we then listen to you and do all this great evil and act treacherously against our God by marrying foreign women?”

²⁸ And one of the sons of Jehoiada, the son of Eliashib the high priest, was the son-in-law of Sanballat the Horonite. Therefore I chased him from me. ²⁹ Remember them, O my God, because they have desecrated the priesthood and the covenant of the priesthood and the Levites.

³⁰ Thus I cleansed them from everything foreign, and I established the duties of the priests and Levites, each in his work; ³¹ and I provided for the wood offering at appointed times, and for the firstfruits.

Remember me, O my God, for good. ^[3]

Nehemiah's response was definitely marked by righteous anger specifically towards these Jewish men, and if you don't read it carefully, it can sound bad as though Nehemiah were hitting women and children... He does not. Nehemiah is confronting Jewish men – he curses them, hits some of them, and like Ezra who pulled out his own hair over his guilt, Nehemiah just gives these guys a little head start on their guilt hair removal...

“It sounds draconian in our ears because such discipline is rare or non-existent in the modern church. It sounds less than loving to our ears because we have grown so accustomed to excusing immoral behavior rather than dealing with it... the assumption so common today is that niceness is the essence of goodness – ... Nehemiah should not be criticized for thinking there are more important things in life than being nice.”
(Thomas, 409)

Three times – Nehemiah says remember me, remember my good deeds, remember this according to the greatness of your steadfast love, remember me O my God for good...

In Hebrew, his “good deeds” are rendered from the word *chesed/hesed* – its “steadfast love” in English – and the good or good deeds he is referring to can be seen as faithfulness to the covenant love of God.

As I remember your steadfast love – remember my good deeds in faithfulness to your steadfast love.

Are there areas of compromise with sin in your life?

Temple space that was dedicated for God's purposes had been compromised into a storage room for a Jewish man who had compromised his own life.

¹⁹Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, ²⁰for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body. (1 Co 6:18–20)

Are you honoring God with your financial resources? Are you generous towards God with your money?

The Jewish people had walked away from joyful, generous obedience and were living in a “give as little as I can” mindset? Jesus never negates the tithe – so why would we, as recipients of God's grace, give less than people under the law? Are you walking in grace-enabled obedience when it comes to joyful generosity? Are you giving your first and best to Him or giving what's last least, or not even giving at all?

¹⁷As for the rich in this present age, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy. ¹⁸They are to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, ¹⁹thus storing up treasure for themselves as a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is truly life

(1 Ti 6:17–19)

Is there space in your life for Sabbath rest? Are you practicing the rhythm of rest and work?

The point of Sabbath is to remember He is God, to cease from striving and cease from producing, to remember that He is working as we are waiting... Ray Ortlund says “*The point of the Sabbath is a dress rehearsal for a future eternity of glad rest in God. So, for now, every one of us can work out the details personally. But in our frantic modern world, the Sabbath offers wisdom that has lasted since the beginning (Genesis 2:2-3). It is not written on our calendars as much as we are built into its calendar. It seems to be part of the God-created rhythm for weekly human flourishing. If we did set apart one day each week for rejuvenation in God, we would immediately add to every year over seven weeks of vacation — and not for “whatever” but for worship, for community, for mercy, for an afternoon nap, for reading and thinking, for lingering around the dinner table with good jokes and tender words and personal prayers.*”

Are there people in your life who are leading you away from honoring God with your life?

In Christ – we are one new humanity. We are no longer primarily identified by the color of our skin, or the country we are from, or the languages we speak – but we are all new creations in Christ, bought by the blood of Christ, and by grace through faith, are followers of Jesus – living in His Kingdom under His loving rule and reign in our lives. More than anything else – we belong to Christ, and because of that we belong to one another.

⁹ But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. ¹⁰ Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. (1 Pe 2:9–10)

As we close this series out — let's remember — the HAND OF OUR GOD IS GOOD. He is sovereign and true, capable and committed to fulfilling His purpose for our lives.

There is a huge difference between what Ezra and Nehemiah had and what we now have. They lived in faith of a promised Messiah – but we are now alive in Christ – we aren't living in the hope that Jesus might come, He did and He is our resurrected King, we are living with Him today, alive in Him today, and trusting He WILL come again.

Our joy is to know and love Him, to trust fully in Jesus and faithfully walk with Him, keeping in step with the Holy Spirit, bearing fruit that glorifies God, loving one another and loving our neighbor to the ends of the earth... in Jesus name.

¹ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Ne 12:43)

² Derek Thomas, Ralph Davis, Third Millennium

³ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Ne 13:1–31)